

## Disorientations on Place and Displacement

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The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war or violence”.<sup>2</sup>

On 24 March 2020, the Government of India announced a complete lockdown, to stop the spread of the Novel Coronavirus. A country of 1.3 billion people, predominantly rural and urban poor, subsistence farmers, migrant workers, day-laborers, small business owners came to a standstill. Far away in Minneapolis, as I sequestered at home in compliance with social distancing guidelines, my immediate thoughts were about what the lockdown would mean for refugees in India. Most refugees in India, like elsewhere in the world, made ends meet doing informal work when they could find it. The Afghan refugee women that I worked with, many of them single mothers, depended on traditional embroidery work, cooking, and other odd jobs for survival. When I enquired about how they were managing during the lockdown when these sources of income however precarious had been cut off, they assured me with typical resilience that they were okay. Yet I knew that most of them had savings, no access to healthcare, and were outside the radar of non-profits distributing food and other necessities in densely populated urban settlements in Delhi. Refugees were not even eligible for the meagre cash and in-kind assistance offered by the government, as they did not have *Aadhaar* cards or other documentation that could prove their right to state support.<sup>3</sup>

Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so<sup>4</sup>

I feared that refugees, living on the margins of citizenship in India would be the first to feel the socio-economic brunt of the ill-conceived lockdown. However, refugees were not its most visible victims. The unemployment and hunger brought about by the lockdown, announced only hours before it went into effect, forced migrant workers to leave the city in large numbers. With no trains or buses, thousands made the long trek back under the blazing summer sun on foot. Even the local governments' assurances of care and protection did not stop them from fleeing the inhospitable metropolises en masse.<sup>5</sup> With their livelihood gone, the migrant workers who kept chaotic megapolises like Delhi and Bombay functioning, risked everything to return to the places they called home. By one estimate, half a million migrants had left Indian cities by early April.<sup>6</sup> The journey proved more fatal than the virus for some.<sup>7</sup> This exodus of migrants unsettled my understanding of displacement and refugitude and challenged the categories of 'migrant' and 'refugee' that we use in academic and policy

discourse. A cruel combination of State policy and a virus forced these migrant workers into “involuntary” repatriation to their villages, which many had left to escape intergenerational poverty produced by centuries of caste and religious discrimination, and land dispossession and crop failures resulting from government policies and environmental degradation. At the same time, my Afghan friends in Delhi, with “official” refugee certificates, could not leave the inhospitable city because they had nowhere to go. The artificiality of oppositional categories-migrants/refugees, citizens/immigrants- becomes evident at these times. The devaluation and disposability of these lives, as the government scrambled to safely bring back citizens stuck abroad and prioritized incarcerating political activists and dissenters, was laid bare for all to see.

One of my dearest friends, Gul, a refugee woman I met in Delhi, received her humanitarian visa to resettle in Australia, a few days before the lockdown was instituted in India. Gul’s terrace apartment in a refugee neighbourhood in Delhi was the place where most of my “fieldwork” was conducted over endless cups of tea. Gul had lived in Delhi for 7 years, and knew the city much better than most Delhiites. A few days before her scheduled departure, she messaged me- “I was in the metro today and I felt like hugging everyone in the compartment. I will miss India so much.” Life in Delhi had not been easy for Gul by any means, but she had a community, a large group of friends who came to her for advice and help. In Australia, she had to go into full quarantine upon arrival. No human contact for 14 days, in a land that was deeply unfamiliar. It was as if the virus wanted to play one more cruel prank on her.

A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.<sup>8</sup>

On 25 May, I was shocked out of the uneasy ennui of life under social distancing, inundated with news of the pandemic death toll, skyrocketing unemployment numbers and the multiple manifestations of socio-economic distress, by the brutal murder of George Floyd, a Black man by four white police officers. Floyd was murdered less than 2 miles away from where I have lived for the past 9 years- my neighbourhood in one sense. I did not watch the video of Floyd’s murder in which he pleaded for breath, even though the air was contaminated with the Coronavirus. I still have not. I prefer to know and remember him as the beautiful, gentle face that adorns nearly every wall and window in Minneapolis today. I was well-aware of the long history of police violence against communities of colour in the Twin

Cities, the defunding of inner-city schools, and the covert racism masked by “Minnesota nice”. In my 9 years of living here, I had gone to rallies to protest the police murder of two other Black men- Jamar Clark in 2015, and Philando Castile in 2016. As most Americans with the privilege to stay-at-home fretted about staying safe from the pandemic, Breonna Taylor was murdered by the Louisville police in her own bedroom on 13 March 2020. The news of her murder was lost in newsfeeds inundated with the statistics of the pandemic, presidential drama and sourdough starter recipes.

As I joined socially-distanced protests and rallies at the Minnesota State Capitol, outside government buildings and the police headquarters in the days following Floyd’s murder, I was exposed to new spaces and modes of solidarity and allyship with the Black people in my community. The grief and rage that people felt over Floyd’s death reignited the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and brought attention to ongoing struggles around housing, public schools, prison abolition and transgender rights that Black organizers had been fighting for a long time in Minneapolis and across the United States. The shame that us non-Black folks felt about our apathy and silence, galvanized us to strive to become better allies. People came together to gather resources- food, housing, clothes, mental health, medication- for those who were struggling to access these basic necessities of life; needs that were exacerbated by the pandemic. It was evident that even though we needed to completely overhaul systems and processes of governance rooted in white supremacy, we had enough resources within the community to provide for all. Why had it taken the murder of George Floyd for people to redistribute the resources they had hoarded? Why had we not come together to feed, care and house everyone in our community before when we clearly always had the capacity to do so? Why had we relegated the blame for these systemic failures of care to a State built on white supremacy, settler colonialism and extractive capitalism? There are no easy answers, but the questions are important. This sense of infinite possibility, a collective vision for a future free of the police and other mechanisms of state oppression, a solidarity that crosses national boundaries and differences of race, class, ethnicity, genders, and sexualities, is Floyd’s last gift to us. We have an opportunity to make it his legacy.

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In the BLM protests, and counter protests by white supremacist groups following Floyd’s murder, many became unhoused. Perhaps, ‘became’ is not the right word. According to one report homelessness has increased by

10% in Minnesota since 2015.<sup>10</sup> Black, Indigenous and other people of colour experience homelessness at disproportionately high levels. On 29 May, activists and organizers negotiated with the management of a no-longer-in-use hotel building a few blocks away from where I live, to make it into a sanctuary for the unhoused people in the area. Where do people who are without house/home/community/sanctuary in their own country/state/city/traditional native lands fall in our categories of migrant/refugee/internally displaced? The 200 or so people who live in the sanctuary hotel have been under threat of eviction from the beginning. Many moved out to nearby parks. After community push back against the park authorities posting eviction notices on tents, on 13 June, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board department passed a plan committing to let transform parks into a sanctuary for people who are unhoused.<sup>11</sup>

As a refugee studies scholar and an immigrant who has been thinking about questions of home, belonging, refuge and the violence of national borders, I feel disoriented by all that I am witnessing at my various home/s and communities. But disorientation can be generative. It is an opportunity to question, unlearn, rethink and relearn categories and our commitments.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> What is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning. *USA for UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency*. Available at: <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/> [Accessed June 18, 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Aman & Shankar, R., 2018. Identity in exile. *The Indian Express*. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/supreme-court-rohingya-refugees-aadhaar-card-act-uidai-5180821/> [Accessed June 19, 2020].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, What is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning

<sup>5</sup> Special Correspondent, 2020. Do not leave Delhi, Kejriwal appeals to migrant workers. *The Hindu*. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/do-not-leave-delhi-kejriwal-appeals-to-migrant-workers/article31201341>. [Accessed June 20, 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee, P., 2020. The Pandemic Exposes India's Apathy Toward Migrant Workers. *The Atlantic*. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/the-pandemic-exposes-indias-two-worlds/609838/>. [Accessed June 20, 2020].

<sup>7</sup> Pandey, V., 2020. Coronavirus lockdown: The Indian migrants dying to get home. *BBC News*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52672764> [Accessed June 19, 2020].

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, What is a Refugee? Definition and Meaning

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

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<sup>10</sup> Wilder Research., 2018. Homelessness in Minnesota: Detailed Findings from the 2018 Minnesota Homeless Study." *Wilder Research*. Available at [https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/2018\\_HomelessnessInMinnesota\\_3-20.pdf](https://www.wilder.org/sites/default/files/imports/2018_HomelessnessInMinnesota_3-20.pdf). [Accessed June 20, 2020].

<sup>11</sup> Turtinen, M., 2020. Board says homeless can stay in Minneapolis parks. *Bring Me The News*. Available at: <https://bringmethenews.com/minnesota-news/minneapolis-park-board-says-homeless-can-stay-there> [Accessed June 20, 2020].